

Calling the Antarctic

Alan Pennington asks when did BBC broadcasts to Antarctica start?

Following the annual BBC Antarctic Midwinter broadcast to British Antarctic Survey (BAS) staff in their Antarctic bases on 21st June, I wondered when BBC broadcasts to Antarctica had started?

The first mention I found of a BBC broadcast to Antarctica is in the 1957 World Radio Handbook:

SERVICE TO ANTARCTIC

22.15-22.45 (Tues, fortnightly) 31, 25 mb

16.15-16.45 (Wed, fortnightly) 13 mb

and in the following year's World Radio Handbook (1958) it was listed as weekly on Tuesdays:

SCE. TO ANTARCTIC

22.00-22.30 (Tues.) 31, 19 mb

There is also a mention in Jerry Berg's excellent book "Broadcasting on the Short Waves 1945 to Today" under the year 1956: *"The BBC broadcast a special weekly program, "Calling the Antarctic", for the men of the Commonwealth Trans-Antarctic Expedition, the first successful overland crossing of the continent."*



Preparations for the Commonwealth Trans-Antarctic Expedition (CTAE) had begun in 1955. Led by British explorer Dr Vivian Fuchs, it was to cross the continent by land via the South Pole, the first time this had been done since Admundsen's and Scott's expeditions of 1911 and 1912. Fuch's party left Shackleton Base in the Antarctic summer, on 24 November 1957 successfully reaching Scott base 100 days later on 2 March 1958: Fuchs was knighted soon after.

The BBC Year Book 1959 mentions that: *"With the whole of the British party, Dr. Fuchs listened clearly to the Christmas Eve edition of 'Calling the Antarctic', which included the Duke of Edinburgh's message".* A BBC correspondent also went on the expedition.

left: Sir Vivian Fuchs on Radio Times cover, 18 May 1958

biography of Goons member Spike Milligan tells us: *"For the first time, the scripts were vetted before recording, The edition for Christmas Eve 1956 was to be made "with the Trans Antarctic Expedition in mind": it was being broadcast by the BBC's General Overseas Service."*

And special editions of the 'Navy Lark' radio comedy were broadcast in "Calling the Antarctic": *"...Calling the Antarctic, recorded on 4 Dec. 1962 and broadcast on 25 Dec. 1962. This was a special Christmas Overseas Service Broadcast for their "frozen friends" in the Antarctic, the 85 members of the British Antarctic Survey serving in seven bases along the Antarctic Peninsula..."* A 'Men from the Ministry' comedy show was included in this broadcast also and another 'Navy Lark' special for the BBC Antarctic service was broadcast on 25 December 1965.

The British Antarctic Survey (BAS) is the UK's national polar research institute. It was known as the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey (FIDS) until 1962. Elizabeth William's blog "Life in Antarctica", was written after the discovery of a box of papers left by her late-father, George Lewis, who worked with FIDS. It includes this, written about the BBC's shortwave broadcast:

'Calling the Antarctic' was a programme, started in 1955, recorded by the BBC for those members of the Falkland Islands Dependency Survey who, like my father, were overwintering in the Antarctic. Personal messages from family members were broadcast to a different man each week as part of the weekly programme, providing a brief sound of home at a time when the sun did not rise, and the ships could not bring mail. In itself, the carefully organised pile of correspondence which I found between my grandmother and various members of the BBC was a poignant testimony of how important this contact was for those at home; for three months arrangements were made for Dad's family to meet in London to record their two-minute message. A script was sent in advance, annotated and returned; news had to be carefully chosen and brevity was essential. Even so, it is noticeable that what everyone tried to preserve were the familiar turns of phrase which would make this carefully regulated communication personal. In another pile of letters, I found my dad's response. When his turn had come to receive a broadcast, he had been unable to hear through static and interruptions in Spanish from South America. "All we can do is to record it and play it back again and again each time picking out a bit more." The painstaking way in which he tried to recover his message underlines the enormity of the gulf that separated these men from home."

(<https://elw0168.wordpress.com/2015/11/12/calling-the-antarctic/>)

I also found the article below (strangely!) in the *Bermuda Reporter* newspaper dated 19 January 1963. I suspect it may have been taken from the BBC's *London Calling* magazine?

Whilst members of the BAS in Antarctica in 2021 have other means of contact with home, this article underlines the lengths they used to go to hear the BBC's "Calling the Antarctic" broadcast (and other BBC General Overseas Service programmes) on shortwave:

A BBC Highlight In The Antarctic

"For us at Fossil Bluff the highlight of the week was the BBC programme "Calling the Antarctic". This heart-felt "thank-you" came to the BBC not long ago from Clifford Pearce, who last year was carrying out meteorological observations as a member of the British Antarctic Survey (formerly known as the Falkland Islands Dependencies

Survey – or more familiarly, the FIDS). Ever since 1955 the BBC has been transmitting a weekly programme from April to September throughout the dark months of the Antarctic winter specially for the scientists, technicians and others during tours of duty with the Survey.

Mr Pearce not only wrote but came along to the studios at Bush House in the Strand, headquarters of the BBC External Services, to broadcast a vivid account in the regular General Overseas Service programme "Shortwave Listener' Corner", of the conditions in which he and his colleagues listened to this special programme for the Antarctic, and some of the General Overseas Service programmes which are heard by listeners all round the world.

At Fossil Bluff on the eastern coast of Alexander Island, Clifford Pearce with his colleague Brian Taylor, a geologist, and John Smith, formed the advance party of fourteen members of the parent base at Stonnington Island 200 miles to the north. Living in a one-roomed hut for eight and a half months, with no sight of the sun for twelve weeks of it, Clifford Pearce admitted that they did feel "a bit cut off". The diesel engine that powered the radio set (used primarily for transmitting weather messages to Stonnington Island) broke down very early on, so they used a pedal generator. Finding that foot pedalling was "rather like riding a bicycle whilst trying to listen to a Mozart symphony", they moved the machine from the floor to a table and pedalled by hand. Even so, ten to fifteen minutes pedalling at a time was quite hard enough work, and they became very discriminating about the programmes they tried to receive.

They tuned in once a day, Mr Pearce said, to the News and Commentary in the BBC General Overseas Service, and the "Listeners' Choice" record programme was another regular General Overseas Service programme they liked to hear. But there was no question of ever missing "Calling the Antarctic, "Every Tuesday evening" said Mr Pearce, "the three of us would move the paraffin lamps over to the radio corner, and one of us would stand at the generator and pedal away. The other two would each hold a solitary headphone to his ear, and for the next 30 minutes a breath of home air would enter the hut – talks on home

news or news about the various expeditions in Antarctica, records and personal messages recorded by our parents and relatives. You can imagine how pleased we were to hear the voices of our folks coming nine thousand miles to us from Britain.” He was sure that many members of the British Antarctic Survey would join him in thanking the BBC for mounting this special programme for them.

Mr Pearce is one of many hundreds of men to whom over the years this programme has bought voices from home while they have been carrying out their important work in the isolated and hard conditions of the Antarctic: and many of them on return do call Bush House to express their warm thanks to the BBC, and the producer Inez Brown. The programme is enjoyed by other listeners too. The whalers often tune into it, and so do the members of scientific expeditions from other countries.

(Bermuda Recorder, 19 January 1963, Bermuda National Library <https://bnl.contentdm.oclc.org/>)

Returning to the World Radio Handbooks on the shelves here, in the 1961 edition I find there is still a weekly Tuesday Antarctica service. But two years later, in the 1963 edition, there’s no listing of an Antarctic service. Nor in any of the other 1960s WRTBs until 1969 which shows:

Antarctica Sce.

22.15-22.45 First Tues of month 9510, 11830

Also in the 1969 WRTB, and throughout the 1970s editions of the handbook, Antarctica is shown along with Atlantic Islands as a target area in the BBC WS shortwave schedule. But even this disappears in the 1980 edition. And there’s no separate Antarctica service listed after the 1969 edition as far as I can see. Maybe a member has a record in their logbook of BBC broadcasts to Antarctica during the 1980s or 1990s, either weekly, or an annual broadcast as now?

I should also add that Radio Australia also broadcast a programme to their Antarctic bases with a very similar name to the BBC broadcast. ABC’s “Calling Antarctica”, broadcast into the 1980s, also included messages and recordings from relatives like the BBC’s “Calling the Antarctic” did.

Moving forward to the present day, I tried to establish when the first annual Antarctic Midwinter BBC broadcast had taken place. I first remember one in June 2009. But in DX Listening Digest (23 June 2010 <http://www.w4uvh.net/dxld1025.txt>) comments from the RN Media Network blog are quoted, including this from Kai Ludwig: “At least on 21 June 2000 the programme went out on the already established slot 2130-2200 UT, via Skelton on 7325 kHz and via Rampisham on 9915 plus 11680 kHz”. So, they’d begun before the year 2000, maybe without DXers noticing?

The 2021 Midwinter broadcast (listen again at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3ct2gb6>) also featured in BBC World Service’s “Over to You” listener feedback show. I recorded a comment for “Over to You”, but only a part of it, asking when the broadcast had started, went on air. Martin Redfern, who produces the show, said 1955 was when BBC broadcasts to Antarctica had started, but didn’t say which year his annual midwinter shows had begun. When asked how



the BAS “over-winterers” down in Antarctica listened to the broadcast he said “it’s a bit like candles at Christmas: we’ve got electric lights now, but we still light candles. They’ve got internet.....but they still love to listen to it on shortwave”. The Midwinter celebration down there was also described as “bigger than Christmas Day”. Martin went on to say that when he took over producing the programme in 2007, it was thought of as “a little bit of favour that we did for the British Antarctic Survey and not of much interest to anybody else, but since then it’s grown and grown”. This edition of BBC WS’s “Over to You” is online at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/w3ct111k>

The annual broadcast has now been presented by Cerys Matthews (left) since 2016, and now always generates a lot of interest amongst DXers. Let’s hope it continues! (AP)